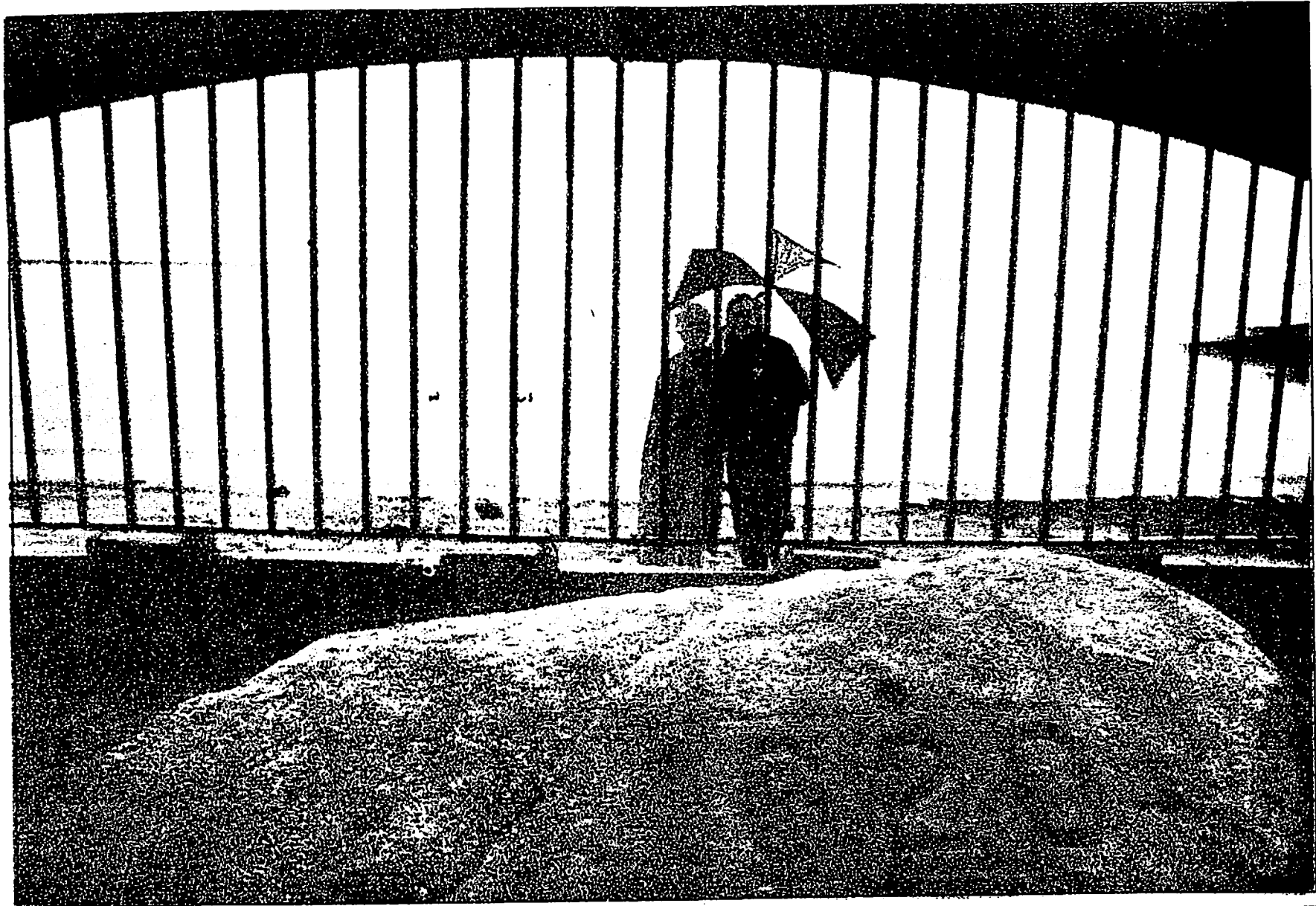


# The not-so-solid history of Plymouth Rock



GLOBE PHOTO / KERRY BRETT

A rainy day doesn't deter Pat and Ed Kelly, tourists from Delray Beach, Fla., from visiting Plymouth Rock, a national icon.

By Jeff McLaughlin  
GLOBE STAFF

**P**LYMOUTH – Sad to say, Plymouth Rock is on almost every cynic's list of most underwhelming historic sites in the land. In a culture that has come to expect history to be served up in multimedia extravaganzas and state-of-the-art computer animations, Plymouth Rock has nary a bell nor a whistle.

## Swept up in time and a nation's growth

It just sits there, looking like an oversized potato. Many visitors, in the hope it is at least secretly interactive, drop a penny on it and make a wish.

Yet the story of the rock is anything but dull and mute. It is a fascinating melange of fact and legend, scholarly suppositions and homely ideals. It is a tale far older than Thanksgiving celebrations, but late November is the most

appropriate time of year for the telling.

The story is best begun in the present, because the Plymouth Rock story is still being written.

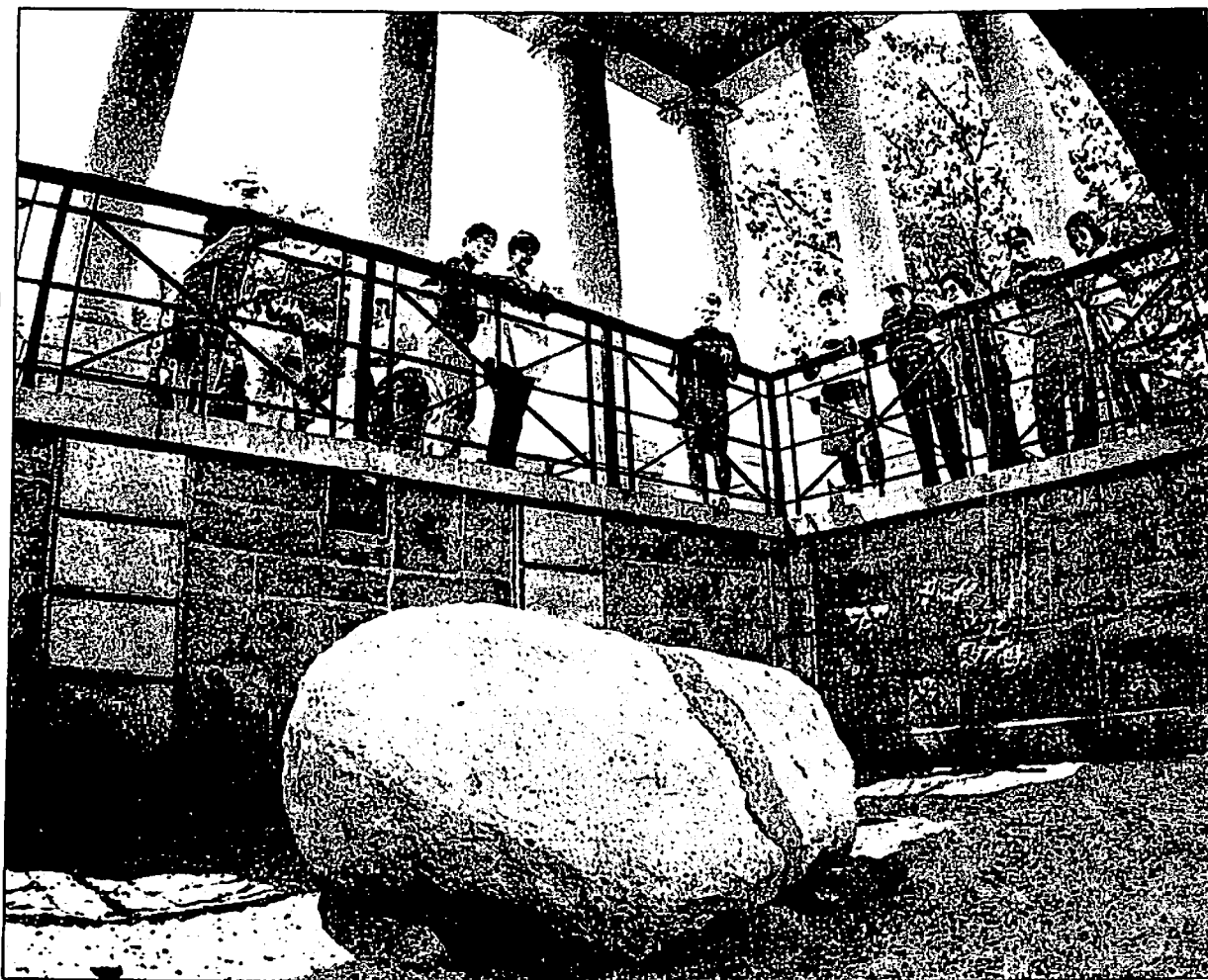
The state has ambitious plans for the harborfront site, officially called Pilgrim Memorial State Park. Two years ago, the Department of Environmental Management proposed a \$34 million public-private renovation project for the

area – akin to the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation project – that would include sophisticated videos, interpretative exhibits, visitor centers and historic recreations.

If and when it becomes reality, Plymouth Rock could become the centerpiece of a gee-whiz tourist attraction.

However the project is moving at a glacial pace so far, using only state funds. Lighting has been installed to illuminate the rock and the granite porti-

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GLOBE FILE PHOTO

Pilgrim Memorial State Park is slated for renovation to turn it into a more lively attraction.

## ■ PLYMOUTH ROCK

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co that dwarfs it, and extensive work along the harborfront is near completion, but the extensive fund-raising needed to accomplish the larger goals of the plan has yet to get off the ground. The sticking point has been finding a prominent business executive to lead the effort – as former Chrysler Corp. CEO Lee Iacocca spearheaded the Statue of Liberty project.

Peter Webber, commissioner of environmental management, said last week, "I hate to put a time frame on it, because we've done that before and been wrong. But now we've contracted with an experienced firm in the nonprofit fund-raising field, the Development Guild, to work on this aspect. By the end of this year, or certainly early next year, we expect to have a specific fund-raising strategy in place and a Massachusetts CEO to head up the foundation."

Webber said a promising prospect has emerged since the Plymouth Rock project was announced in December 1994: Destination Cinema, a Utah-based company that operates IMAX-style movie theaters like the one at Boston's Museum of Science, has expressed strong interest in a Plymouth waterfront location. Destination Cinema already runs such theaters at the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone Park and Niagara Falls and works cooperatively with the National Geographic Society in developing films.

Webber said the company's CEO, Richard James, wrote to Lt. Gov. Paul Cellucci on Oct. 28 to put its preliminary proposals on the table.

"The potential of Plymouth is tremendous," said Webber. "There are so many stories that converge on the rock and the waterfront – from the pre-settlement era of the Wampanoags to the Pilgrims themselves and down through the centuries as Plymouth Rock became an important symbol to the nation. From the standpoint of environmental and historical education, which this agency is most concerned with, it's a perfect match."

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Plymouth Rock is granite, specifically what geologists call Dedham granite, a kind of rock that is unimaginably old, formed 600 million years ago, before the continents as we know them were formed. It arrived here, to help form the bedrock of what we call North America, with a crash – part of a land mass floating on a tectonic plate on the earth's surface that crashed into the eastern edge of another landmass to form the Eastern Seaboard.

Jump forward millions of years to the Ice Ages – much more recent, but still 14,000-18,000 years ago, before the first Native Americans came to this land. Successive waves of glaciers poured down from the north to scour the land.

The glaciers were huge rivers of ice that may have been two to three miles thick, taking up so much water that the ocean was 200-300 feet lower than it is now. They were so powerful that they ripped huge chunks away from the bedrock, grinding some up and pushing some forward many miles. Eventually, when the glaciers retreated, they left behind vast plains of ground-up rock – much of the land of southeastern Massachusetts is of such origin – and here and there, intact rocks, called glacial erratics.

Plymouth Rock is a glacial erratic. No other rocks like it are found in Plymouth. It probably was broken off from bedrock to the northwest, perhaps as far away as Concord. When it was left behind by the glacier, it was much bigger than the rock the Pilgrims saw (thousands of years of freezing and cracking and wave erosion took a big toll). And the rock the Pilgrims saw was probably four or five times as big as the one we see now (erosion has continued, but more important, the rock has been moved, hacked at and broken into pieces on several occasions since the Pilgrim era).

### Arrival of the Pilgrims

When the voyagers aboard Mayflower came to these shores in 1620, the modern history of Plymouth Rock begins. And it is a story that can be very confusing to anyone who relies on the superficial accounts in most textbooks.

The Pilgrims – we call them that, although they didn't use the term, which emerged many years later – arrived in Provincetown on the outer tip of Cape Cod in November of 1620. That was their first landfall, and there was no rock involved, because Provincetown is a sand spit formed relatively recently.

They stayed anchored there for about five weeks, while Myles Standish and other leaders made several expeditions along the Cape Cod coast looking for a suitable site for a permanent settlement. They wanted a safe harbor, lots of fresh water for drinking and good land for farming. The Cape sites were all disappointing in one way or another – they missed Barnstable Harbor – and so in late December the men in the exploring party set off in their shallop – a small boat that could transport 15 to 20 people and be worked by oars or sail – to cross Cape Cod Bay and check out the mainland 20 miles away.

A northeaster blew up, the waves in the bay tore away their rudder, ripped their sail, and they nearly foundered in the surf off Manomet. Under oars, they found shelter on Clark's Island in Plymouth Bay, three miles from the Plymouth shore. After observing the Sabbath, they came ashore.

It is that landing that lies at the heart of the Plymouth Rock story.

The tradition that has emerged over the past 376 years is that the Pilgrims used the rock as their first stepping stone to the New World. In fact, they previously had set foot on land – and slept overnight – in several places. But it was at Plymouth that they established their permanent settlement, on the site of a former Wampanoag farming village, and so in that sense the Plymouth landing was the most important one.

But did they actually step on the rock?

### Absent in accounts

There is no mention of a rock in any of the accounts written by the Pilgrims, nor in any other books or manuscripts of the next 200 years.

It was not until 1832, with the publication of Thacher's "History of

Plymouth," that the familiar Plymouth Rock story appeared. James Thacher relied on the recollections of an elderly man, Deacon Ephraim Spooner, who recounted an episode from his youth that involved a 94-year-old man, Elder Thomas Faunce, who in turn was recounting a story told him when he was young.

It seemed that in 1741, Elder Faunce heard that Plymouth residents planned on building a large wharf at the foot of Cole's Hill on the waterfront. Faunce was born in Plymouth in 1647, the son of John Faunce, who arrived from England aboard Ann in 1623, three years after Mayflower. Thomas Faunce had been told the story of the landing on the rock when he was a youth, Thacher reported, and he arranged to be carted and carried to the waterfront to tell the enterprising townspeople that the rock's importance transcended their mercantile needs.

In Thacher's words, Faunce, "Having pointed out the rock directly under the bank of Cole's Hill, which his father had assured him was that which had received the footsteps of our fathers on their first arrival, and which should be perpetuated to posterity, he bedewed it with his tears, and bid to it an everlasting adieu. These facts were testified to by the late venerable Deacon Spooner, who . . . was present on the interesting occasion."

Over the years, many respected scholars have examined the Plymouth Rock story, and Elder Faunce's speech has been given considerable credence. Samuel Eliot Morison – Harvard historian, Navy admiral and old salt – examined the matter at length and concluded that the exploring party from Clark's Island probably landed farther north, near the modern Plymouth-Kingston town line, but subsequently used the rock as the base for a rudimentary wharf when the Mayflower sailed over from Provincetown and all the homesteading gear and eventually the passengers moved ashore.

However impressed the townspeople were with Elder Faunce's ac-

count, they still built their wharf, although they incorporated the rock into the cartway rather than burying it.

#### Revolutionary symbol

More than 30 years after Elder Faunce's emotional visit, however, the rock had been deemed to be an important symbol to Plymouth supporters of the revolutionary cause. In 1774, members of the Old Colony Club, led by Col. Theophilus Cotton, decided to haul it up to Liberty Pole Square (now Town Square) as an additional symbol of the quest for independence from Britain. Five years before, the club had inaugurated a celebration of the Landing of the Forefathers (although no mention of the rock is to be found in its records of that event, according to "Plymouth Rock: Its History and Significance," a 1953 paper by former Pilgrim Hall Museum director Rose T. Briggs that is still in print in pamphlet form).

The moving effort by Col. Cotton and his hearties caused the rock to split horizontally, and it was the smaller, upper part that was moved to Liberty Square. That piece in turn broke in 1834 when it was being moved to the front lawn of the Pilgrim Hall Museum, and other moves and temporary dislocations also resulted in breaks, shears and splits. There is considerable vandalism in Plymouth Rock's history as well, notably during the 1860s when the first granite canopy was being built (the current McKim, Mead and White-designed structure is the second portico and dates to 1920).

According to a Plymouth Antiquarian Society publication, "The Peregrinations of Plymouth Rock," "There is a tale of a stolen piece falling from a loaded wagon passing up North Street at night, and being secured by a nearby resident. Other tales concern pieces in stone walls and cellars, and one piece found its way into a market to be used to weight down meat in the brine barrel, in the making of corned beef." Other sources tell of a 400-pound piece being used for many years as a Plymouth doorstep, of pieces made into paperweights and sold as souvenirs, of shards sent to notable politicians across the United States and abroad.

The first portico, designed by Bostonian Hammatt Billings, was not big enough to accommodate the rock – the larger portion was still largely buried and its dimensions were not well known – so when the time came, it was hacked to fit, or as one source put it, Plymouth Rock "suffered additional mutilation."

So it goes, down through the years, an illuminating tale that speaks volumes about the dual nature of the American spirit – equal parts patriotic reverence and down-to-earth pragmatism.

Rose T. Briggs has the last word here: "This legend was established in the formative days of the nation. It has had its influence on American thinking, and it is this influence which gives the Pilgrims their importance. It is the fact that they landed – and remained – that matters, not where they landed. Yet it is no bad thing for a nation to be founded on a rock."

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